Leadership Learnings Across a Decade

by
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January 5, 2016 marked my 10th anniversary of client service in my own firm. I couldn't help being a bit reflective on this occasion. I was curious to see if I could articulate what I think I've witnessed about leadership characteristics over the last 10 years (which just happen to include the trying years of the Great Recession). In my judgement, those who are doing the most impactful work in the social sector lead by example by doing the following. They:

1. **Act with clarity about intention** – Their intention is open and full of spirit. Organizationally, that means being intentional about values and culture. Working first to assure that the spirit of their intention is right and good, they see that intention amplified in their work; if it's diffused or distracted, they see the work dissipate into disjointedness.

2. **See the whole system** – Recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things, truly inspired leaders behave and act as one member of a large network. Their view is not limited by the walls of their facilities or the boxes of their org charts. They understand patterns of behavior and delayed "feedback" from the surrounding ecosystem. They know that human systems grow in the direction of their deepest and most frequent inquiries. They navigate complexity by opening their minds, their hearts, and their resolve in order to put purpose into <u>collective</u> action.

3. **Discern the true nature of the challenge: technical or adaptive** – Determining the right question to ask and solve is paramount. The most successful leaders are able to peel enough layers from any presenting problem or opportunity to tell whether the required response comes from the known, technical array of solutions (often found in "best practices") or must come from a new way of being still long enough to observe, interpret, and determine the proper intervention (aka, the leadership required for an adaptive challenge).[1] The latter have little or no precedent and, therefore, require real-time learning and experimentation. These leaders find that they had to hold loosely their familiar mental models about why and how things work in order to solve adaptive challenges

4. **Practice agility, constantly scan the horizon, and learn from the future**— There's nothing like learning "moments" that come in the magnitude of disruptions like the Great Recession of 2008+. Those who've maintained their agility through times of disruption are good at letting go of the organizational practices that quietly get codified in the social systems of the organization. These familiar ways of "doing" things—like planning—have to periodically get aired out. There are few exercises as intellectually AND emotionally challenging as trying to imagine alternative futures—not for their own organization as much as for the ecosystem in which they operate. However, in so doing, these leaders have developed plausible alternative futures that could conceivable arise. They then watch the horizon for signals of the scenario for which they are seeing

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[1] See much of the writing of Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky on the nature of adaptive leadership.

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early indication. By "rehearsing" multiple futures, these leaders hard-wired agility into their organizations.

5. **Practice resilience to unleash a new way forward** – These masterful leaders have given up on the myth of control.[2] They've also given up on the myth of homogeneity as culture-enhancing. Instead, they recognize that diversity is central to organizational resilience if we understand and appreciate differences in multiple ways (e.g., cultural, learning styles, leadership styles, cultural competence, etc.). Exhibiting the four characteristics above, these leaders anticipate disturbances of their "way" and avoid the trap of having to have all the answers. Instead, they sought to enculturate resilience throughout the organization. They believe they can only care for and nurture themselves so they can do likewise for their team....so their teams can care for and nurture themselves....so they and their teams can care for and nurture those they collectively serve....so those they serve can care for and nurture themselves. This cycle of self-care and nurturing creates resilience without dependence and unleashes possibility.

6. **Demonstrate leadership through personal courage and authenticity** – The most effective leaders I've seen know it takes courage, practice, humility, personal mastery, and a supportive, reciprocal relationship with their environment to make the profound changes in the world about which they care most deeply. They—first of all—are willing to be disturbed so as to avoid missing opportunities for greater impact. They are clear—but *not* dogmatic—about their world view. This clarity guides how they present themselves to lean into wicked problems with concerted action. They give away more of everything (wisdom, power, information, etc.), trusting that others are doing good work in the world. They tell stories as a way of teaching, hoping only to inspire and influence the outcome. Coming from a place of authenticity and consideration, they attend to the right things wherever they are, emotionally free of attachment to the outcome. This clarity and freedom from attachment enables them to invite people into a sacred vision or conversation about shared community. This is authentic leadership (aka, right being). They have found and practiced this mindset as a way to live with the tensions and to create new realities. When their leadership is rooted in the personal courage to have authentic conversations with people, they set the table for shared imaginings to occur. Such leaders create the environment where the whole organization can foster openings toward transformation, helping people re-perceive their operating environment, their institution, and the world.[3]

7. **Respond from a place of love** – Most of my work of the past decade has been in the social (nonprofit) sector. In those settings, no conversation about organizational direction or strategy gets too far without at least some referenced to philanthropy as one

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[2] This is the 3rd of "Ten Things to do in a Conceptual Emergency," a 2009 book of the same name through the International Futures Forum. See www.internationalfuturesforum.com

[3] A fine guide to leadership authenticity is found in Kevin Cashman's *Leadership from the Inside Out (2008).*

resource engine. A contemporary conversation among some of the largest and oldest grant-making foundations posits their obsolescence. The notion of "impact investing" is making the circles, symptomatic of deep and widely shared frustration that the century-old conservative foundation model of philanthropy is focused on preserving and augmenting the endowment, not one based on what a foundation does with its assets to improve the common good. In late 2015, philanthropy circles were once again agitated by the Chan Zuckerberg announcement of their initiative to advance human potential and promote equality, fueled by pledging their many billions of dollars, yet operating as an LLC instead of the "traditional" foundation.

Surely all this inquiry and opining will lead us to some clarity about "the work," right? What I think I've observed and concluded from the past decade's work is that if we're concerned about the common good, if we have the discipline to see through a systems lens that everything is interconnected, and if there's a growing frustration that philanthropy may be dancing at the edges of obsolescence (or at least disruption), then perhaps we've got to consider a new standard for philanthropy. In *Conversation 2010*, my brother and knowledge partner, Ken Hubbell, raised the pointed question, "what's love got to do with philanthropy?" He set the context for the question by noting other powerful change theorists and organizational systems thinkers who bring definitions of love beyond the familiar. Adam Kahane refers to work by theologian Paul Tillich, defining love as "the drive toward unity of the separated." Ken went on to observe that love in this sense is the drive to reconnect and make whole that which has become or appears fragmented. Years ago, Peter Senge described love as an attitude and sensibility: as commitment to serve and a willingness to be vulnerable in the context of that service. It usually requires the full and unconditional commitment to another's completion. In describing a shift in the approaches of action-science, C. Otto Scharmer included a powerful statement about love from Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida: "love is the power by which we grasp ultimate reality. Love is the deepest knowledge of things."

Therefore, this sense of engagement and service with others is a key feature of a loving approach. It implies the "others" have a presence and a right to co-create the world. Furthermore, it suggests that if individuals and organizations are really to grasp reality and connect the pieces into a sensible whole, then leaders have a responsibility to understand their own inner place and condition—the source from which they operate—and its impact on their attention and choices. Done with clarity of intention and with authenticity, love is the real currency of our work.

I am grateful for the opportunity to pursue the work I love, to lean in to powerful possibilities, and to partner with smart, soulful, committed leaders. We all have much to teach and much more to learn. Happy New Year. It's time for me to get back to work.

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